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ABSTRACT

Although more than half of all college students in this country are enrolled in two-year colleges and nearly half of all college faculty members teach in these institutions, two-year colleges are rarely mentioned in American fiction. An informal survey of over 100 people who read widely turned up only four novels and two short stories in which a character attends or teaches in a two-year college. In these works, the student characters are non-intellectual, often shallow, perhaps comic, and sometimes sympathetic; and while the faculty members may not be non-intellectual, shallow, or comic, their jobs are seen this way. Possible reasons for the near invisibility of community colleges in fiction are: (1) the relative newness of two-year colleges as a mass cultural pattern; (2) the low socioeconomic status of the major groups who enroll, particularly in the urban community college; and (3) intellectual elitism. While some suppose that community college students and faculty will remain unstoried and unsung, others anticipate that two-year colleges will be featured more frequently in literature in the future. (LAL)

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THE MISSING MAJORITY: THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN AMERICAN FICTION

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THE MISSING MAJORITY: THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN AMERICAN FICTION

Norma Jean Moffitt is working on her pectorals in a body-building class.[1] She is also learning to write paragraphs at Paducah Community College. This thirty-four old student is strengthening her mind and body in order to leave Leroy and Mabel, her truck-driver husband and her domineering mother. She is typical of many characters in contemporary American fiction. Her story is told in the present tense, and it concerns an uneducated, working-class person whose life just sort of happens. The tone is comic much of the time. But in one way she is a rarity. Norma Jean may be taking only one composition course at night, but she is one of the very few characters in American fiction that has any connection to a two-year college.

This is not an accurate reflection of our cultural pattern. More than half of all college students in this country are enrolled in two-year colleges, and nearly half of all college faculty members teach in two-year colleges. I am one of those two-year college teachers, and I also spent my freshman year in a junior college, so I find the problem of the missing majority interesting. In addition to questioning many friends and colleagues, I sent a survey to almost one hundred people who read widely, most of them community college faculty, asking for any examples in American fiction of characters, however peripheral, who attend or teach in two-year colleges. This request turned up three novels, one of them listed by two respondents, and an unpublished short story by a colleague who has published several novels. I already knew of three short stories, and I later found a recently published novel with a narrator who is a community college dropout.

Two librarian friends polled colleagues at the Chicago Public Library,

especially those whose job it is to review new works, and a writer friend took my survey to the Iowa Writer's Workshop this summer. No results in either place. Two respondents suggested I contact people who went on themselves from a two-year college to become well-known as writers or in some related field. I wrote to Sidney Harris, the columnist, and Gwendolyn Brooks, the poet, both of whom attended a city college in Chicago, and Roger Ebert, the film critic, who taught at Daley College, my own school, early in his career. No luck here, either. Brooks wrote a poem for a Crane Junior College yearbook in 1968, but it is an all-purpose celebration of a student who struggled to succeed, with no specific indication that the school is a two-year college, or even urban or black.

Someone suggested I look through the short stories of Raymond Carver, and a friend thought John Barth's The End of the Road was set in a community college. Both Carver and Barth turned up characters at state colleges. In Carver's "Night School," two women drinking in a bar convince the male narrator to drive them to the house of the instructor of their adult education reading class.[2] The professor, they say, likes to take a drink, too, and they have something on him. They never arrive. The three of them, and and maybe the professor who teaches Reader's Digest stories when his students are interested in Hemingway, are depicted as losers.

Barth's narrator teaches at Wicomico State Teacher's College in Maryland.[3] He took the job as occupational therapy on the advice of his therapist. He needed to do something mindless and rigid. He is in the English Department.

In a third example of misdirection, Roger Ebert's assistant came up with the movie Educating Rita. It is set in Dublin at Trinity College, but fea-

tures an uneducated, working-class, part-time, returning woman student. In each of these three cases, a connection was made between a lack of status or ability and the two-year college.

A young respondent who reads short story romances slightly better than Harlequin reports that currently they may have a woman character who takes night courses at a local community college in order to meet men, or a man. This fiction is not memorable, however, and she cannot remember a particular story for me to read. A faculty member at a California community college says that some television soaps have minor characters who attend community colleges, but, again, she can remember no examples.

I will eliminate Jerry Brooks's unpublished short story, because it is unpublished.[4] A reader of June Brindel's "Sartre is a Cold Fish" who did not know she taught for some years in a Chicago City College would never make the connection.[5]

This leaves four novels and two short stories. The characters in them who are students are non-intellectual, often shallow, and perhaps comic. They are sometimes sympathetic. All but one of them are women, and all but one of their creators are women. Three of the novels depict two-year college faculty members as well as students, and they are mostly male. The teachers themselves are not always non-intellectual, shallow or comic, but their jobs are seen this way. The job of teaching in a two-year school may have some positive qualities, but it is not a job for a responsible adult. Maybe as a temporary or part-time job, but full-time it is a ridiculous thing to do with your life.

In Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's <u>Falling</u>, Elizabeth, the central character, is in much-needed therapy.[6] She takes a job in the English Department of a

Chicago City College, along the way to getting well. When she is more normal she will move on to a four-year institute of technology, and then to a New York university. Her experience with us is grim, and often very funny. The building looks like a penitentiary, everything is painted Ex-Lax brown, and the department chairman has, of course, no future. The students are morons. At best, one can enjoy watching them become semi-morons. The morons like Elizabeth, and they improve under her teaching. She and the only other teacher worth considering form what they call an aristocracy of disgust. There are no academic standards, and there is no scholarship. A faculty member who long ago published one article is there because he lacks self-respect and he has six children. The surrounding working-class neighborhood is filled with pasteboard houses covered with plastic reindeer whose noses light up.

In June, however, at the end of the semester, she realizes she is sorry to leave. She may have changed some lives for the better, and she sees that she has not seen all that was going on in front of her. Her students become sympathetic characters.

Maureen, the central character in Joyce Carol Oates's Them, lives a life filled with unrelieved grimness and uncontrolled violence.[7] She comes from a working-class Detroit neighborhood filled with tired and helpless people. Near the end of this longish novel, twenty-six-year old Maureen attempts some control of her future by enrolling in a night class at squalid Highland Park Junior College. She has heard that this school is easier than the University of Detroit, where she flunked out of her night classes some years earlier. She determines to marry her English instructor as part of her life-improvement plan, although he is already married and has three children. She accomplishes her goal.

Jim, the part-time junior college instructor she chooses, is thirty-four, is described by others as kind, loves his first wife of nine years, and dreams of escaping from Detroit. A graduate student at Wayne State University, he is short of money and shabby. He wants Maureen, as if in a dream. They marry. Their life together is very much like his former life, but for Maureen it is the step up that enables her to turn her back on her terrible past and her dismal family.

The only black writer on my short list is Gloria Naylor, although a high percentage of black college students are enrolled in two-year schools. The Women of Brewster Place live, desperate and abused, in the underclass of a dying city neighborhood.[8] One who is an exception is young Kiswana Browne, formerly Melanie Browne, who has dropped out of college and moved to Brewster Place deliberately in order to bring political consciousness to the downtrodden and trouble her middle-class family at the same time. Near the end of the book, as she is coming to terms with who she is, she enrolls part-time in a community college, studying there precisely because a community college has no status. She need not apologize as much for her change in behavior back towards the upwardly mobile.

Ella Leffland's "Last Courtesies" barely qualifies for my list.[9] Jody, a gum-snapping, stereo-blasting young hooker who lives upstairs of Lillian, the central character, is taking macrame and World Lit. at the jay cee. Lillian is told this by Jody's boyfriend, a serial murderer known as the Rain Man. For a better idea of Leffland's ability as a writer, try her fine novel Rumors of Peace, instead.

I use Bobbie Ann Mason's "Shiloh," Norma Jean's story, in a humanities course, with interesting results. Many of the students find it strange to

read about a character that in so many ways is like themselves. Those who seem closest to this Paducah Community College student are often those who try to distance themselves from her the most. A class discussion can bring out the similiarities and lessen the distance. Norma Jean, like many of the fictional characters we have discussed, and like many of our students, is trying to gain some control of her life. She and they see the community college as one place to get help.

The last work on my list, which is also the newest, is T. Glen Coughlin's The Hero of New York.[10] It differs from the others in that both writer and student character are male. Charlie, the nineteen-year old narrator, drops out of a Long Island community college that is one hour from New York City. The school and area are one step up from the Brooklyn working-class neighborhood from which his family moved. Charlie is a bored and failing Business Administration major. He is interested only in his waitress girlfriend and the troubles of his policeman father, the hero of the title.

We meet one of his instructors briefly, a carefully dressed corporation accountant, who teaches part-time. Charlie refers to him as a little turd. Charlie himself is on his way to being a violent alcoholic like his father. He is in Rinky-Dink College, as he calls it, instead of a state university, because his father convinced him to stay at home. He fantasizes transferring to Princeton, as a former good friend of his did when they graduated, but this is unlikely. At the end of the novel, Charlie is unsure of his direction, and the girlfriend, who dropped him for a rich dope dealer, is taking a community college course in hair cutting.

Those of us connected to two-year colleges probably recognize Charlie, and maybe we know his accounting teacher. We know the women students in some

of the other works, certainly. But why don't they appear more often in American fiction, and where are the others? Ones who are not seen as comic failures, at least not by themselves and their families, and perhaps not by some faculty. The ones who do not feel that life just happens to them, mostly for the worse. Graduation at Daley, for example, is both humorous and moving. Our gym is packed with grandmas in Slavic babushkas and Arab gowns, parents in suits and in working clothes, and a lot of kids, including the grown children of our graduates. Black women wearing outfits out of MGM musicals arrive late, carrying long-stemmed roses for their nieces and daughters. It's wonderful theater, and these people have not come to see losers. They have come to applaud winners, often the first family member to attend college, on her or his way up. Another example that comes to mind, not so funny, is a young Chinese-American, a former student who made our college a part of a truly horrendous journey he made in order to become a doctor at a Chicago hospital. He responded to my survey by saying he didn't have any leads, but would I like to write his biography? I am sure you can think of other kinds of students who are totally missing in American fiction. And I hope that you know other kinds of faculty members, besides those who appear in the three novels discussed earlier.

I would like to suggest reasons for our near invisibility, and why, when we do show up, it may be as comic relief. I offer three possibilities: 1)the relative newness of the two-year college as a mass cultural pattern, 2)the social status of the major groups who enroll, particularly in the urban community college, and 3)intellectual elitism.

Although the two-year college was established much earlier, attending one did not become an American pattern for large numbers of people until the

1960s, when, during some years, the federal money tree sprouted a new campus at the rate of one per week. Every book discussed here was published after that, many of them around 1980. Like Vietnam, the experience may take a decade or longer to emerge. Or unlike Vietnam, two-year colleges are considered so colorless, beneath even satire, as one of my respondents wrote, that we will not emerge, even with more time. Just like supermarkets, another mass pattern in American culture. John Updike set his short story A & P in such a place, with a checker as his central character, but few other writers choose that setting. Community colleges could at least turn up in popular culture, but there are no movies or TV situation comedies about them.

The social status of the major groups enrolled in two-year schools, especially in large cities, is low. A decided majority of students are women, many of them older than the traditional college age. Hispanic and black students are more likely to be in a community college, along with any group, like recent immigrants, that has a large percentage of its members who are working-class or underclass.

Writers from these groups who are familiar with community colleges do not use the experience overtly, even though they may write about other low-status activities. I could find very little from feminist or Hispanic or black or working-class writers, as we have seen. Having a past that includes attending a community college seems to be something like having played the accordion. It is not only low status; there is something embarrassing about it that makes people want to forget it ever happened.

I don't intend to argue the actual intellectual merits of two-year colleges vs. other undergraduate schools. Community colleges are not elite.

Intellectual elitism, or snobbery, as several respondents called it, is another matter. After more than two decades of teaching, I can think of only two male faculty members who actually say they feel that they belong in a community college. Many others give the impression that they are stooping; they have somehow been sidetracked from their true destinies at major universities or businesses. Women faculty members are less likely to feel this way, perhaps because we have not been taught as thoroughly to have higher ambitions. It is not accidental that all but one of the books I found were written by women.

Even authors who are also teachers at a two-year school do not write about the experience, although, as a respondent wrote from Boston, "It's such a natural for autobiographical whining." Several of the faculty members I questioned told me they always intended to write a novel set in a two-year college, but no one has actually done so. Short biographies, on book covers, for instance, or even resumés, do not mention attendance at or teaching in a community college. I know that such experience may have been only a stepping stone to a college degree, or a temporary job on the way to another, but this remains still another aspect of our invisibility. I admit that before writing, on the first page, that I attended a junior college as a freshman, I hesitated a moment, feeling, rightly or wrongly, that anything I said thereafter would be devalued, filtered through that piece of information.

A colleague from an English Department who answered the survey supposes that we will remain unstoried and unsung. On the other hand, June Brindel, whose short story was mentioned earlier, predicts that at least some more fiction will appear after this paper, including a story that she herself is

thinking of writing. I hope she is right. It's time we are sung, whatever the voice, however inarticulate the non-intellectual croak.

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October, 1986

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